

Read the reflection below by Dane Pennerman, a student struggling with the social boundaries that exist in his middle school. Break into small groups and discuss with your classmates your responses to the accompanying questions.

“Don’t Talk To Her”

As Roberto and I entered the cafeteria, I saw my friend Melissa.

“What’s up, Melissa?”

Roberto punched me and said, “Don’t speak to her.”

“Why?”

“She’s a Rocker.”

“Roberto, she’s still my friend.”

As Roberto and I proceeded to the lunch line, I saw my buddy Hakeem.

“Hey Dane, come sit with us?” Hakeem offered.

“Go ahead, Dane, I’ll catch you later,” Roberto said, looking at me blankly.

“No, Roberto you can come to!”

Roberto looked at Hakeem’s table, and said to me, “I’ll just see you after school, Dane.”

All these people were some of my best friends in elementary school. What happened? When did I miss this? When did these boundaries go up around me? And more important, why hadn’t I noticed them? Was I trying to pretend that they didn’t exist?

The close friendships I had cultivated in elementary school were disappearing. All of my friends were now in their own “cliques.”

The school cafeteria was now divided into Rockers, African Americans, Hispanics, and the Popular Kids. Why couldn’t we all hang out together? Why does Hakeem call me “white boy” when he sees me talking to my Caucasian friends? Why does Roberto only know me between classes?

How am I supposed to handle this?

I view Hakeem, Melissa, and Roberto as friends, equally. How can I look beyond appearances, when it’s the main focus of everyone around me? Am I wrong for not participating in the boundaries my friends create?

Sometimes I try to discuss the issues my friends have with each other. Is there really any basis for the ill feelings? I feel their dislike for each other is unwarranted.

I have yet to hear valid reasons from anyone. I remember talking to Hakeem. He told me Roberto's not really my friend: "Just because the two of you have a class together and walk in the halls together means nothing. When his Spanish friends come around, he doesn't know you, Dane."

I feel social boundaries are a way to avoid the things we are afraid of; things we may not understand about others. The way a person chooses to dress or the color of his or her skin should not separate us.

Melissa's black clothing is the way she chooses to look on the outside. Clothes do not make the person. Melissa faces some of the same challenges in life as a teen that Roberto and Hakeem face. When I try to find differences between my three friends, outside of individual appearance, there are none.

I know the three of them would really like each other if they gave one another a chance. On a daily basis, I push my friends to become friends. I always follow a negative remark with a positive one. I'm always quick to point out good points about one friend to the other.

I feel I am in the middle of something that may last my entire life, well after my middle school years. This bothers me. How can I get Rockers, Hispanics, and African Americans to accept each other?

I know communication is one way to mend this rift. If people who look different on the outside can get past appearances, then we will be able to heal.

Maybe as teens of the new millennium, we can solve this problem and cross all social boundaries.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. As the author reflects on the cliques that exist at his school, he asks, "When did these boundaries go up around me?" Have you noticed such boundaries at your school? When and why do you think they surfaced?

2. The author notes that his school cafeteria is divided into "Rockers, African Americans, Hispanics, and the Popular Kids." What "crowds" exist at your school? Do students socialize across these groups? What encourages or discourages them from doing so?

3. The author says, "Social boundaries are a way to avoid the things we are afraid of, things we may not understand about others." Do you agree? What differences keep people in your school apart?

4. The author wonders how he can look beyond appearances when it's the main focus of everyone around him. What can individuals do to get beyond appearances and change some of the social patterns that exist in school?